

Spruce Beetle Epidemic and Aspen Decline Management Response

5-13-2014 Public Meeting – What we heard and next steps

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG) initiated the public comment period for the Spruce Beetle Epidemic and Aspen Decline Management Response (SBEADMR) project through publishing a Notice of Intent (NOI) on July 31, 2013 to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and solicited public comment on the proposed project. The project is intended to be a rapid response of the rapid escalation of insect and disease on Forests in Western Colorado. The project is being carried out in accordance the U.S. Forest Service Bark Beetle Strategy approved in July 2011. Objectives and timeline for the SBEADMR project are included in the attached brief.

The GMUG is using a Forest Service Enterprise Team of qualified specialists including wildlife, botany and ecology, watershed sciences, archeology, landscape architecture, silviculture, fire ecology, economists and NEPA to complete the EIS. The team's work and analysis is reviewed by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists on the GMUG. As specialists reports and the EIS are written the goal is to use the best available peer-reviewed scientific articles pertinent to the project.

A public meeting was held on December 3, 2013 provided an additional opportunity for the public to provide comment. Input from the NOI and this public meeting were used to develop a no-action and three-action alternatives. On May 13, 2014 a second public meeting was held at which a description of alternatives, analysis assumptions, design features, silvicultural prescription and an implementation strategy were presented.. This second meeting sought to obtain public input on work completed to date on the project. Key concerns expressed by the public during the meeting include:

1. Concern from some that the process has not been collaborative enough; perspective from others that collaboration is occurring adequately and there is an open invitation to "sit at the table of involvement."
2. Concern that the project is too broad-scale over a long period of time (10 years) and thus lacks site-specific analysis associated with more traditional projects completed through NEPA by the Forest Service. The public also sought assurances and clarification on public involvement once the Record of Decision is issued and the Forest begins implementation.
3. Concern whether The Forest Service has considered "best available science" in the analysis. Specifically the need for management, analysis approaches and assumption, design features and silvicultural prescription proposed to be used.
4. Concern that the economic analysis is not addressing the indirect effects of treatments on ecosystem services including recreational activities.

While the project didn't include pre-NEPA collaboration, the GMUG is seeking additional public input through involvement of the Public Lands Partnership (PLP) to address concern stated above. While the scope of the "enhanced" public collaboration will address concerns stated above, other possible challenges and obstacles raised during the analysis may also be addressed. Since the Forest Service has initiated the environmental review through issuance of the NOI, additional public input is only being sought on the alternatives and other information presented at the May 13, 2014 meeting. Specifically, the following actions will be taken between mid-June through August 1, 2014.

1. PLP Executive Committee in cooperation with GMUG staff will develop a plan to clearly define the extent of collaboration, the role collaborators and decision space. The plan will also include public outreach and civic education essential for project success.

Due date: June 13, 2014.

2. GMUG staff will provide 1-2 page write-ups of analysis approaches and identify the “assumptions” (guidelines or sideboards) used in the analysis. Tie approaches and assumptions to their fulfillment of legal and policy requirements (including Forest Plan). Write-ups will be posted on the Forest web-site and interested publics notified seeking their review and comment.

Due date: June 13, 2014

3. GMUG staff will post on the Forest website up-dated descriptions of the alternative being analyzed in the Environmental Impact Statement. Interested publics notified seeking their review and comment.

Due date: June 13, 2014

4. GMUG staff will post on the Forest website, a list of design features and silvicultural prescriptions to be used during implementation to protect forest resources. Interested publics notified seeking their review and comment.

Due date: June 11, 2014

5. GMUG staff will post on the Forest website the proposed post-NEPA implementation strategy and monitoring. The implementation strategy is designed to ensure all surveys and management considerations required by agency policy, regulation or law will be implemented throughout the life of the project. This strategy will also discuss when and how public input and participation will occur. Interested publics notified seeking their review and comment.

Due date: June 13, 2014

6. GMUG staff will post on the Forest web-site all pertinent publications and other sources of information being used in the analysis. Through PLP, additional pertinent scientific information will be sought from interested publics.

Due date: on-going

7. GMUG staff in cooperation with the Forest Service Enterprise Team will address the indirect effects of treatments on ecosystem services including recreational activities. Findings will be included in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement scheduled to be released on September 1, 2014.

Due date: September 1, 2014

8. GMUG staff will develop a “comment box” on the Forest website to accept public in-put generated from items 1-7 above. GMUG staffs will also up-date the public the hard copy comment form and make it available on the Forest website.

Due date: June 13, 2014

9. Conduct a field trip on the Gunnison Ranger District to view first hand spruce-fir and aspen conditions. Objectives to be accomplished include: 1) obtain an understanding of the level of mortality occurring in spruce and aspen stands; 2) discuss how tools being developed in the EIS

will be used during project planning and implementation; 3) seek public input on approaches and science being used.

Due date: by July 31, 2014

10. Feedback from items 1-7 may generate a need to additional public meetings. PLP will facilitate these meetings in cooperation GMUG staff. The goal of the meeting will be 1) clarify the issue and 2) seek consensus on how the issue might be resolved. The Forest Service will make the final decision on approaches to be taken.

Due date: as needed through August 8, 2014.